Threads of Honor

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Threads of Honor

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Summary

A humanitarian aid mission ends in disaster when a U.S. Marine Corps CH-53 is shot down over Honnō City. The retaliation is immediate, but the deeper battle is fought within a city built on corruption, classism, and the iron grip of REVOCS and Ragyo Kiryuuin.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

Chapter 1: Oorah

April 30th, 2017

The warm Okinawan afternoon settled over Marine Corps Air Station Futenma as Satsuki Kiryuuin strode with perfect posture beside her mother, Ragyo Kiryuuin. Their small entourage including the Elite Four and an American military public affairs officer serving as their guide moved steadily along the flight line, passing rows of helicopters, cargo aircraft, and maintenance hangars. The rhythmic whine of turbines, the scent of jet fuel, and the distant rumble of engines combined into an atmosphere unlike anything Satsuki had experienced before.

Though she maintained her usual composed expression, her crimson eyes wandered with quiet curiosity. Marines hurried between aircraft carrying toolboxes, directing vehicles, and performing inspections with efficiency. Others chatted casually during a brief lull in their duties, their relaxed demeanor contrasting sharply with the rigid discipline of the academy she commanded back home.

Their guide gestured toward a nearby Bell UH-1Y Venom before continuing to a parked MV-22 Osprey, bureau number 6769. Several Marines occupied the space beside the aircraft while waiting for maintenance to finish. Three of them had started tossing a football back and forth across the concrete, laughing whenever someone made an especially difficult catch. Their easy camaraderie caught Satsuki's attention more than the aircraft itself.

For just a moment, the normally unshakable student council president forgot herself, watching the effortless rhythm of their game. A faint blush crept across her cheeks as she realized she had become distracted.

"Satsuki!" Ragyo's sharp voice cut cleanly through the sounds of the flight line.

Satsuki straightened immediately.

"Yes... my apologies, Mother," she replied, clearing her throat and restoring her usual calm expression, though a hint of embarrassment lingered.

At that exact moment, one throw sailed wide.

"Oh, no!" one Marine called as the football spun end over end, bouncing once before rolling directly to Satsuki's polished shoes.

The conversation around the tour came to an abrupt pause. Satsuki looked down at the football for a brief moment before bending gracefully to pick it up. Turning it over in her hands, she examined its worn leather and faded markings with quiet curiosity. It was far lighter than she expected. The disciplined heir of the Kiryuuin empire and the easygoing Marines from halfway across the world regarded one another as a mutual curiosity of varying social classes.

"Sorry about that! Bad throw on my part!" Ricardo laughed, "Wanna toss it back?"

Satsuki remained motionless for a heartbeat, the worn leather of the football feeling foreign and rough against her palms. The Elite Four shifted behind her, Gamagōri already drawing breath to scold the Marine for such a casual approach toward their president. But Satsuki raised a subtle hand, silencing her enforcer without looking back.

She turned her gaze toward the man who had spoken. He was tall with a lean, athletic build and eyes that held a level of genuine warmth she rarely encountered. Unlike the students at Honnōji who trembled in her presence or the sycophants who bowed too low, this man Ricardo looked at her with nothing but friendly amusement. The contrast was disorienting; he possessed an undeniable authority in his bearing, yet he carried it without the need to intimidate.

"A lapse in precision," Satsuki remarked, her voice carrying its usual commanding edge, though the sharpness was tempered by something softer. Her lips didn't quite smile, but her expression relaxed. "Though I suppose even the most disciplined soldiers have their moments of... unpredictability."

Slowly, she shifted her weight, turning her body toward him in a way that was ostensibly practical but allowed the crisp white fabric of her uniform to catch the light. She held the ball at her hip, studying his posture with calculating interest.

"I am not accustomed to such games," she added, her fingers tracing the laces. "However, I find myself curious. Show me the proper form."

Ricardo chuckled and jogged over, boots kicking up a faint cloud of dust before he stopped an arm's length away. He didn't seem the least bit bothered by the imposing entourage glaring holes through him.

He let out a sharp whistle across the field. "Martin! Give us a target!"

Zoe, her white bobcut tousling in the wind raise her hand. "Got it!"

Ricardo turned his attention back to Satsuki, gesturing toward the football in her hands.

"Alright, first things first." He lightly pointed toward the laces. "Grip it with your fingertips instead of your palm. Yeah... just like that."

He smiled as she adjusted her hand almost immediately. "There you go, amor. You're a quick learner."

Stepping beside her, he demonstrated the motion with exaggerated simplicity. "Keep your shoulders pointed at Martin, plant your lead foot where you want the ball to go, then bring your arm over the top. Don't try to muscle it and let your hips do most of the work."

He backed away several paces, giving her room. "Relax. Nobody's keeping score." He pointed toward Martin with a grin. "Just put it anywhere near my buddy and he'll make you look good."

Satsuki stiffened imperceptibly when the word 'amor' slipped from his lips. It was a foreign term, intimate and warm, delivered with such casual confidence that it bypassed her usual defenses before she could process it. Behind her, she could practically feel the heat rising from Gamagōri's face, no doubt imagining the Marine's imminent punishment for such forwardness, but Satsuki found herself strangely intrigued rather than offended.

"Amor," she repeated quietly, testing the weight of the word on her tongue as if it were a new tactical maneuver. "A peculiar choice of address."

Despite her verbal critique, she followed his instructions with meticulous precision. She was a woman who demanded perfection in all things, and if this game required a specific technique, she would master it immediately. She planted her lead foot exactly where he indicated, focusing on the sensation of the laces against her fingertips. She felt his presence behind her a warm, steadying force that made the air around them feel charged.

When he mentioned letting her hips do the work, she felt a flicker of something beneath her ribs. She shifted her stance, deliberately emphasizing the movement of her hips to establish the proper balance he had described. The motion caused the skirt of her uniform to sway gently against her thighs, a subtle display she knew would be noticed.

Drawing a steady breath, she brought her arm over her top in the arc he demonstrated. She didn't try to overpower the ball with brute strength; instead, she channeled the disciplined control she used in swordplay into the throw. With a sharp exhale, she released it. The ball spiraled through the air with surprising accuracy, cutting a clean path toward Martin.

Ricardo grinned as the football arced cleanly into Martin's waiting hands. "There we go!" he said, raising his hand.

Satsuki regarded the gesture for a brief moment before, after the slightest hesitation, lifting her own. Their palms met with a sharp smack that echoed across the field. An unfamiliar sensation settled over her. No one had ever celebrated something so insignificant with her before.

"Nice throw," Ricardo said with an approving nod before jogging back toward his crew.

Within moments, the impromptu game resumed as if nothing unusual had happened. Satsuki remained where she stood, quietly observing.

Ricardo laughed as his co-pilot intercepted another pass, while their crew chief darted between the two men with surprising agility for a woman at 6'3" before snatching the football out of the air. The woman possessed bronze skin, neatly trimmed white hair cut into a practical bob, and striking emerald green eyes that sparkled with playful confidence. She spun the football effortlessly on one finger before launching it back toward Ricardo, drawing a chorus of laughter from the crew.

There was no concern for rank or appearances among them. Pilot, co-pilot, and crew chief teased one another like lifelong friends, their camaraderie as natural as breathing. It was... different. An hour later, Satsuki returned with her mother and the accompanying delegation. Whatever recreation had occupied the Marines was long over. The three aviators now stood in flight suits beside their MV-22 Osprey, every trace of casualness replaced by disciplined professionalism.

Ricardo moved methodically around the aircraft with a checklist in hand, inspecting the engine nacelles before crouching beneath the fuselage. His co-pilot examined the cockpit while the crew chief checked the cargo ramp and cabin, calling out observations that Ricardo acknowledged.

The laughter from earlier had vanished. Now they were Marines preparing an aircraft for flight. Satsuki wished to say her goodbyes much to the chagrin of the Elite Four... for the first time, she had felt something. As if she had made a connection.

The way Ricardo moved efficient and utterly serious reminded her of her own student council members during a crisis, yet there was an underlying layer of something else: a quiet, shared understanding that didn't require shouting orders to be effective.

As Ragyo moved ahead to engage with the base commander, Satsuki seized her moment. She slipped away from the main delegation with the silent grace of a predator, her white boots clicking softly against the tarmac as she approached the Osprey.

She stopped several paces away, giving him the space his duties required, but she didn't turn back. Instead, she stood with her hands clasped behind her back, her spine straight as a blade,

watching him work. The sunlight glinted off the aircraft's rotors and caught the sharp angles of her face.

"The transition from play to purpose is seamless," she said quietly when he emerged from beneath the fuselage, her voice cutting through the ambient noise of the flight line without breaking her composed demeanor. "It is... admirable. Most who claim discipline falter when the moment of consequence arrives."

She turned her head to meet his hazel eyes, a rare, almost imperceptible softening in her blue gaze. "I find myself regretting that our encounter was interrupted by the necessities of protocol."

A few days later, VMM-262 had been tasked with delivering special supplies to Honnōji Academy... Ragyo wanted the best caviar possible and the only way to get it through safely was through the Marine Corps' Tiltrotor or heavy lift helicopters. Because one of the local groups had downed a CH-53, the Ospreys were seen as a better choice for their speed and sent with them was an escort of two AH-1Z Vipers and two F-35B Lightning IIs flying top cover.

Zoe sat on the ramp of the Osprey with her Browning M2HB loaded as she watched below for potential threats. The helicopters each pre flared to avoid any potential MANPAD threats while the Vipers zigged and zagged to avoid RPGs.

"Fuck me... this feels like goddamn Kabul!" Martin exclaimed.

"This is what happens when you impoverish and oppress." Ricardo said.

Soon, the helicopters reached Honnōji Academy. Moments later, the F-35s descended to low altitude and thundered over the campus in a deafening show of force flyby, their engines shaking the buildings below. The message was unmistakable to everyone watching, including the Elite Four, the United States Marine Corps was not to be taken lightly.

Meanwhile, the AH-1s established a perimeter around the academy. Their crews scanned every rooftop and courtyard as the chin mounted 20mm cannons slewed from target to target in sync with the FLIR sensors, searching for any sign of a threat.

The sheer auditory assault of the F-35Bs passing overhead sent vibrations through Satsuki's very bones. Standing atop the academy's central tower, she watched as the sleek silhouettes tore through the sky, their engines roaring with a primal authority that made even the most zealous students of Honnōji shrink back in instinctive awe. This wasn't merely a demonstration of power; it was a statement of absolute dominance over the airspace she considered her own.

Behind her, the Elite Four were on high alert. Gamagōri looked ready to challenge the very sky itself for daring to thunder so loudly in his presence, but Satsuki raised a single finger, silencing the brewing storm of indignation.

"Stand down," she commanded, though her eyes never left the horizon where the Vipers were circling like hungry hawks. "This is not an intrusion. This is... an escort."

Her heart quickened as she spotted the distinctive tiltrotor blades of the VMM-262 Osprey approaching the landing zone. The aircraft moved with a menacing grace, its engines tilting upward to prepare for a vertical descent. The display of coordinated force the Vipers scanning rooftops with their targeting sensors while the F-35s maintained top cover was a display of tactical sophistication that mirrored her own military preparations, yet possessed a terrifying, modern lethality.

As the Osprey touched down on the reinforced helipad, kicking up a whirlwind of debris and dust, Satsuki descended from the tower with purposeful strides. She arrived just as the ramp began to lower.

When the figure emerged from the aircraft, Satsuki felt a strange, disorienting rush of relief mixed with intense curiosity. There was Ricardo, no longer the casual shirtless athlete in MARPAT trousers, but a Marine officer in full gear, moving with the same deadly efficiency she had admired days before. The contrast between the man who had called her 'amor' and the soldier who now commanded such overwhelming firepower was intoxicating.

Satsuki stepped forward as he approached, her cape billowing in the rotor wash. "Captain Martinez," she said, her voice carrying over the whine of the engines, sharp and clear. "It seems your definition of 'special delivery' involves considerably more firepower than I anticipated."

Ricardo returned the greeting with a respectful bow before straightening, the professionalism in his posture matching the Marines standing behind him. His eyes met Satsuki's, and despite the helmet still atop his head and the rifle slung across his chest, the same warm expression from the football field returned.

"I'm afraid this wasn't my call, President Kiryuuin."

Ricardo glanced skyward as one of the F-35Bs thundered overhead before looking back to her. "Not long ago, a CH-53 was shot down not far from this island. We lost good people." His tone grew more solemn. "Until we're certain the threat's been eliminated, every transport mission is treated as a potential combat operation just like Afghanistan before."

He pointed toward the fighters circling above. "So now we fly with escorts, maintain air cover, and assume the worst while hoping for the best. It's not exactly the grand entrance I'd have preferred..." A gentle smirk tugged at the corner of his mouth. "...but I'd rather explain an intimidating security detail than explain to someone's family why we took unnecessary chances. And hey... free airshow, right?"

The loadmaster then pushed the large crate of caviar down the ramp and onto the helipad for the students to move to the refrigeration facility. Satsuki’s expression remained impassive, but her fingers tightened slightly behind her back. The resentment she felt toward her mother's frivolous demand for caviar was sharp; Ragyo had essentially treated the U.S. Marine Corps like a personal courier service for a luxury snack, utterly oblivious to the lives and risks involved in the operation. To her mother, the F 35s and Vipers were merely background decoration. To Satsuki, they were a reminder of what real responsibility looked like.

"Loss is a luxury no leader can afford to ignore," Satsuki replied, her voice dropping to a more intimate register. The solemnity in Ricardo's tone resonated with her own hidden burdens the secret war she waged against her mother, the weight of the lives she had already sacrificed to build her army. "Your caution is not intimidation, Captain. It is competence. The distinction is one my... associates would do well to learn."

She glanced at the Elite Four, who were already bustling to move the crate toward the refrigeration facility. Their movements were efficient, but lacked the organic, trusted

synchronization she had seen in the Marines.

As the crew began to secure the cargo, Satsuki stepped closer to Ricardo. The rotor wash still whipped her hair around her face, and the proximity allowed her to catch the faint scent of sweat and gun oil clinging to him. It was a raw, honest smell that felt more real than any perfume in the Kiryuuin household.

"Tell me," she murmured, her blue eyes scanning his face with a bold, appraising intensity. "When you are not conducting combat operations for the sake of fish eggs... do you still find time for games that require no score?"

Chapter 2: Scream, Aim, Fire

May 2nd, 2017

Ragyo Kiryuuin awoke not to the gentle glow of the morning sun spilling through the floor to ceiling windows of her penthouse, but to the unmistakable howl of military jet engines. A split second later, the deep, resonant blue note of afterburners rolled across Honnō City, rattling the crystal glasses in her private bar and sending faint ripples through the surface of the indoor pool.

Her maroon eyes snapped open yet she didn't panic, instead she listened. Years of cultivating power had taught her to distinguish between the sounds of commerce, celebration, and conflict. This was unquestionably the latter. Rising from her bed with refined elegance, Ragyo walked barefoot toward the panoramic windows overlooking the city below. Two VMFA-232 F/A-18 Hornets screamed between the towers in perfect formation before banking sharply toward the industrial district.

Seconds later, a pair of GBU-54s struck somewhere beyond the skyline. The shockwave reached the penthouse moments afterward, vibrating through the steel and glass structure with enough force to make the windows tremble and dark smoke began curling into the morning sky.

One of her aides hurried into the room, tablet in hand. "Lady Ragyo," she said, bowing. "Marine aircraft have conducted a precision strike against multiple facilities belonging to the Yoshida Syndicate. Initial reports indicate the operation was coordinated with Japanese authorities."

Ragyo watched the Hornets climb back toward the clouds, disappearing as effortlessly as they had arrived.

"...Interesting." A slow smile spread across her face. "The Americans are no longer just guests it seems..."

Several blocks away, the operation was unfolding with lethal precision and minimal collateral damage.

"Chaos Two-One, this is Sakura One. Type One control. Advise ready for remarks."

The calm, measured voice belonged to First Lieutenant Erina of the Japan Ground Self-Defense Force, the Joint Terminal Attack Controller standing on the rooftop of a damaged office building overlooking the battlefield.

Beside her, two U.S. Marine Corps M1A1 Abrams tanks rumbled through the streets, their turrets traversing deliberately as Marine riflemen advanced behind them. Every intersection was treated as a potential ambush, infantry clearing storefronts and alleyways while the tanks provided overwatch with overwhelming firepower.

Erina watched through her laser rangefinder as several members of the Yoshida Syndicate attempted to regroup around a warehouse complex and she keyed her radio. "Chaos Two-One, target marked by laser. Friendlies are south of the canal, advancing north. Cleared hot."

"Chaos Two-One copies. Laser acquired. In hot."

High above the city, one of the VMFA-232 F/A-18 Hornets rolled inverted before diving steeply toward the target. Seconds later, a pair of JDAMs separated cleanly from the aircraft. The explosions ripped through the warehouse with surgical precision, collapsing the upper floors while leaving the Marines and JGSDF soldiers untouched.

"Damn good hit," one of the Marine tank commanders remarked over the radio.

Erina allowed herself the faintest smile. "Good effects on target," she replied. "Continue the advance."

The battle was far from over. A formation of MV-22B Ospreys swept over the rooftops in tight formation, escorted by a pair of AH-1Z Vipers flying low between the skyscrapers.

Moments behind them, dark painted MH-47G Chinooks of the 160th SOAR thundered into the city, their terrain following radar allowing them to skim just above the skyline before flaring into a hover.

"Assault force inbound," Erina reported into her radio.

The first ropes dropped and within seconds, Marine Raiders from MARSOC slid effortlessly from the hovering Ospreys, boots hitting the pavement before immediately establishing security around the landing zone. Across the street, Green Berets from the 1st Special Forces Group descended from the MH-47Gs with equal speed and precision, fanning out to secure intersections and begin clearing the surrounding buildings.

"Ground force established," Erina confirmed. "Raiders and Green Berets are moving to Phase Line Bravo."

The helicopters wasted no time lingering. As soon as the last operator touched the ground, the ropes were released and the aircraft climbed away, banking hard as the AH-1Z Vipers continued to circle overhead, their sensors scanning every rooftop and alleyway for emerging threats.

What had begun as an armored push had transformed into a full joint assault. Every movement was synchronized. Every element knew its role. To anyone watching from afar, including the woman standing high above the city it was a chilling demonstration of military efficiency.

Ryuko Matoi sprinted across the rooftops of Honno City with Mako Mankanshoku's hand locked tightly in hers. The city below had descended into complete chaos. Sirens wailed through the smoke-choked streets, shattered windows glittered beneath the orange glow of distant fires, and the thunder of gunfire echoed from every direction. The JSDF had poured into the city, but they weren't alone anymore. American Marines had arrived as well, their aircraft filling the skies above like enormous steel birds.

Ryuko had wanted answers ever since her father was murdered. She wanted to confront Satsuki Kiryuuin. She wanted the truth about the Life Fibers. None of that would matter if she and Mako died before tomorrow.

"Come on!" Ryuko shouted over the deafening roar of helicopter rotors and explosions. "Don't give up now!"

"I-I'm trying!" Mako gasped, nearly stumbling as they leapt the gap to the next rooftop. Ryuko caught her arm before she lost her balance, pulling her safely onto the concrete.

Behind them, several armed yakuza burst through the rooftop access door. They raised their rifles and opened fire, bullets snapping past their heads and kicking up chunks of concrete.

Above them, the unmistakable shape of a USMC MV-22B Osprey banked sharply. One of the crew chiefs leaned from the open side door, spotted the two girls below, and immediately signaled the pilots. The tiltrotor descended with practiced precision, transitioning into a pinnacle landing atop the neighboring building.

"Jackpot!" Ryuko laughed, relief washing over her face as the massive aircraft settled just ahead of them.

The feeling lasted only a second. Mounted in the open ramp was a Browning M2HB. Ryuko froze as the weapon swung directly toward her, its enormous barrel seeming wider than her fist. Her heart skipped.

Then the gunner squeezed the butterfly trigger. The deafening roar of the .50 caliber machine gun drowned out every other sound. A stream of tracers ripped over Ryuko and Mako's heads, tearing into the yakuza pursuing them. The rooftop erupted in sparks, shattered masonry, and panicked screams as the attackers scattered for cover.

The gunner gave the pair a quick wave before stepping aside from the ramp.

"Move!" She shouted.

Ryuko didn't need to be told twice. Still gripping Mako's hand, she sprinted up the lowered ramp and into the safety of the Osprey as the crew prepared for an immediate takeoff.

Ricardo pushed the Osprey's rotors forward and firewalled the Tilt Control Lever. The Osprey rapidly gained speed and altitude while the crew chief, Zoe kept the Yakuza on the ground suppressed with the ramp gun.

The G forces pressed Ryuko and Mako into the jumpseat as the Osprey surged forward, the aircraft tilting its nacelles toward the horizon in a powerful display of aerial agility. Through the open ramp, Ryuko watched the rooftop they had just vacated shrink rapidly. Zoe was still working the Browning, the rhythmic thump thump thump of the heavy machine gun vibrating through the airframe. The tracers stitched lines of fire across the concrete below, ensuring the Yakuza remained pinned down and well out of pursuit.

"Whoa! We're flying!" Mako squealed, her face pressed against the interior bulkhead. "It's like we're on a giant mechanical bird! Ryuko, look! We're above the smoke!"

Ryuko didn't answer, she was staring up at the cockpit, catching glimpses of the pilot through the reinforced glass. She had never seen someone handle a aircraft with such casual, absolute authority. The way the Osprey banked smooth yet aggressive spoke of someone who knew every inch of his machine's limits. Her heart was still hammering against her chest, not just from the fight, but from the sheer adrenaline of the rescue.

As the aircraft leveled off at altitude, leaving the burning city behind, Ryuko slowly let go of Mako's hand. She shifted her weight, wiping a smudge of soot from her cheek. She felt a strange, immediate sense of safety she couldn't quite explain. "Not bad," she muttered to herself, a small, defiant smirk tugging at her lips. "Not bad at all."

Zoe sighed and stowed the M2 and then raised the ramp to prepare the Osprey for high speed flight, "She's ready for lightspeed, cap... what are we gonna do with the rescues?"

"We take them back to Futenma and see where they came from." Ricardo replied as he rejoined formation with the AH-1 Escorts and other Ospreys.

The hydraulic whine of the ramp sealing shut cut off the rushing wind, plunging the cabin into a relative quiet punctuated only by the steady hum of the twin engines. Ryuko finally took a proper look at the woman who had just saved their lives. The crew chief was tall impossibly tall with striking bronze skin and waist length white hair that seemed to catch

whatever light filtered through the small windows. She carried herself with a casual, no nonsense toughness that Ryuko instinctively respected.

"Futenma?" Ryuko repeated, testing the word. "Is that some kind of base?"

Mako, meanwhile, had already recovered from her initial shock and was vibrating with manic energy. She suddenly lunged forward, nearly colliding with Zoe's legs. "Oh my gosh! Thank you so much for not letting those mean people shoot us! You're like a super hero airplane lady! Do you have snacks? I'm really hungry after all that running!"

Ryuko reached out and grabbed the back of Mako's collar, hauling her back before she could overwhelm the crew chief. "Quit it, Mako! Give her some space." She turned her attention back to Zoe, crossing her arms beneath her chest. Despite her tough exterior, Ryuko felt a flicker of something she rarely experienced: genuine gratitude mixed with a strange curiosity about these outsiders.

"I'm Ryuko. The loud one is Mako," she said, her tone still blunt but lacking its usual hostility. "We don't really have anyone to go back to right now, but if you're taking us somewhere safe, I'm not gonna complain."

Zoe's stern expression softened into the faintest hint of a smile as Mako's enthusiasm crashed headlong into the tense atmosphere. "Prazer em conhecê-las," she said, inclining her head. "Gunnery Sergeant Zoe Amari. You can call me Zoe."

With ease, she reached into a cargo pouch on her bag and tossed Mako a sealed MRE. "Chili with beans. Not exactly gourmet, but it'll keep you alive."

She looked back to Ryuko, meeting her guarded stare without challenge. "And yeah, Futenma's a Marine Corps air station. That's where we're headed. Once we land, you'll get food, water, a medic if you need one, and somewhere nobody's shooting at you."

Zoe rested a hand against the cabin wall as the helicopter banked gently. "Until then, buckle in and try to get some air back into your lungs. You've both had one hell of a day it seems."

Mako didn't need any more encouragement. She tore into the MRE with the ferocity of a starving wolf, her eyes widening as she discovered the chili. "CHILI! Mako loves chili!" she muffled through a mouthful, already halfway through the first pouch. "You're an angel, Zoe san! A big, tall, heliplane angel with snacks!"

Ryuko rolled her eyes at Mako's antics but couldn't help but relax slightly at Zoe's straightforward demeanor. There was something refreshing about the Gunny's lack of pretense, she wasn't treating them like civilians to be coddled, but like passengers who needed to survive.

"Thanks, Zoe," Ryuko said, leaning her head back against the vibrating wall of the fuselage. "I appreciate the hospitality." She glanced toward the cockpit, where the pilot remained steady despite the chaos they had just fled. "And thanks to your pilot, too. That was some pretty impressive flying."

She shifted position, trying to find a comfortable spot on the hard bench. Her muscles were beginning to ache from the adrenaline crash, and the dried blood on her clothes felt itchy against her skin. Despite the exhaustion, her mind remained sharp, cataloging every detail: the disciplined crew, the advanced aircraft, and the sheer scale of the military operation surrounding them. Futenma sounded like a fortress, and for the first time in days, Ryuko felt like she might actually have a moment to catch her breath and maybe plan her next move.

Chapter 3: Black Night

The surveillance monitors lining the wall flickered with live feeds from across Honno City. On one screen, the unmistakable roar of Marine Corps MV-22s lifted into the evening sky, their massive proprotors tilting forward as they transitioned from hovering to forward flight. The aircraft banked south, disappearing beyond the city's skyline toward MCAS Futenma. Satsuki Kiryuuin remained perfectly still, her hands folded behind her back, her expression as composed as ever.

Yet her eyes lingered on the fading aircraft. Among them was Ricardo. She knew the flight schedule well enough by now. She had memorized it without ever admitting why. Every departure left the city quieter than before, and every return carried with it an anticipation she refused to acknowledge aloud. It was irrational. Undignified.

And yet... she waited all the same.

A soft laugh echoed through the chamber. "Satsuki-chan... still thinking of that peasant, aren't you?"

Without warning, Ragyo Kiryuuin appeared beside her, resting a gloved hand against her daughter's cheek. The touch was deceptively gentle, but Satsuki stiffened immediately. There was no affection behind it, only utter and complete possession.

"He is nothing more than a roach beneath our designer heels," Ragyo purred, smiling as though discussing the weather. "Though I must admit... that delightful spectacle a few days ago was rather amusing. Such marvelous American exceptionalism. Their grand display of outrage over a single helicopter and a handful of inconsequential lives..." She giggled behind her hand. "The chest thumping, the declarations of moral superiority... humans truly are adorable when they believe themselves morally righteous."

Satsuki's blue eyes narrowed. "Don't say such things," she said quietly.

"Oh?" Ragyo tilted her head, her smile widening. "Have I touched a nerve? How curious. The mighty Student Council President... defending a foreign soldier and a Marine at that..."

"He is not responsible for the actions of others."

"No?" Ragyo circled her daughter like a predator stalking her prey. "Then tell me, dear daughter... what makes this Marine so different? Why do your eyes follow those aircraft every time they leave? Why do you know their schedules? Why have you begun speaking of someone so... ordinary?"

Then a long... deafening silence followed. Satsuki refused to answer. To admit the truth would be to surrender control over herself, a weakness she had spent her entire life eradicating.

But even she could not deny what had begun to grow within her. Ricardo possessed none of the wealth, status, or influence expected of someone worthy of standing beside a Kiryuuin. He was simply a Marine Corps Osprey pilot stationed in Japan, carrying out his duties with quiet professionalism. He neither feared Satsuki nor sought to impress her. He spoke to her as though she were simply another person, not an untouchable icon perched above the world. It was... refreshing... It was beautiful.

Ragyo's smile slowly faded into something colder. "How disappointing. My daughter... developing feelings for an insect."

Satsuki calmly removed her mother's hand from her face. "I suggest you leave."

For a brief moment, mother and daughter locked eyes. One smiled and the other refused to bend. After lunch, Satsuki stood, back straight and her gloved hands clenched at her sides. Through the heavy ornate doors, Ragyo’s voice pierced the hallway not just a scream, but a melodic, cruel shriek that made the lesser aides tremble. The Kiryuuin matriarch's fury was legendary, but this particular outburst carried a note of genuine irritation. The news from the Pacific was clear: the U.S. Navy had moved two Wasp class LHDs the Makin Island and the Essex into striking distance.

Satsuki didn't flinch, but her mind raced. The deployment of Amphibious Assault Ships meant more than just ships; it meant Marine Expeditionary Units. It meant F-35s, Ospreys, and thousands of Marines ready to deploy at a moment's notice. It was a show of force, a diplomatic middle finger aimed at the Kiryuuin empire's growing influence.

As she turned to leave, she nearly collided with someone. Satsuki's composure returned instantly, her blue eyes sharpening as she looked up. It was Ira Gamagōri. His presence here, so close to the inner sanctum, was bold perhaps dangerously so but his expression remained calm.

"My mother is most displeased it seems.."

"Those Pathetic Marines.." Ira scoffed.

Satsuki's gloved fingers tightened almost imperceptibly. She turned her head slightly, studying the way Gamagōri's massive frame seemed to fill the corridor, his expression one of disdain. The word "pathetic" hung in the air between them, a familiar refrain for the disciplinary enforcer who viewed everything through the lens of order and strength.

She didn't immediately correct him. Instead, she shifted her stance, the subtle movement causing the fabric of her white uniform to pull taut across her curves. She took a slow step closer just enough to enter his personal space without crossing the line into impropriety. The faint scent of her perfume mingled with the sterile air of the hallway.

"Pathetic?" she repeated, her voice dropping an octave, becoming a smooth, dangerous purr. "Tell me, Gamagōri... do you truly believe the mere presence of steel and firepower constitutes weakness?"

She tilted her head, allowing a few strands of her dark hair to fall forward. "The Americans have sent their most versatile assets to our doorstep. The Makin Island and the Essex are not merely ships; they are floating fortresses designed for rapid, decisive intervention." Her blue eyes flickered upward to meet his gray ones, her gaze holding his with an intensity that bordered on a challenge. "There is a certain... discipline in their audacity. A willingness to stand their ground against an unknown power."

She leaned in slightly more, her breath ghosting near his ear. "Perhaps you are simply frustrated that your 'Impenetrable Shield' has no one to block."

"Hmph! You fancy the pilot you met during our little field trip to that base, don't you Satsuki-chan?" Ira chuckled, "Typical... such weakness."

Satsuki did not flinch at the casual use of her first name, nor did she recoil from his laughter. Instead, she allowed a dangerous stillness to settle over her. The accusation was direct blunt as a physical blow and she could see the mocking amusement dancing in his gray eyes. He was testing her, pushing against the boundaries of their professional hierarchy with the boldness only he could muster.

"Weakness implies a loss of control, Gamagōri," she replied, her voice deceptively calm. "And I assure you, I have never been less in control of my circumstances than when I am commanding them."

She took another step forward. Given his towering height, she had to tilt her chin up, but she did not cower. The movement deliberately drew attention to the elegant line of her throat and the way the high collar of her uniform framed her face. "If admiring the strategic audacity of a foreign power makes me weak, then perhaps your definition of strength is too narrow. You see a pilot who flies a machine. I see a man who understands the weight of responsibility."

Her lips curved into something that wasn't quite a smile, but something far more provocative a smirk of recognition. "Besides, if you spent half as much time observing the capabilities of our visitors as you do monitoring my personal interests, you might understand why their arrival is significant."

She paused, her gaze dropping pointedly to his lips before snapping back to his eyes. "Or perhaps... you are simply jealous that a 'pathetic Marine' has managed to capture my attention more effectively than your own disciplinary duties?"

April 16th, 2017...

A CH-53E Super Stallion from HMH-465 thundered low over Honnō City, its three engines echoing between the shanties. Its cavernous cargo bay was filled not with Marines or

ammunition, but pallets of food, bottled water, medicine, and blankets destined for the city's poorest residents, the people most referred to simply as the "No Stars."

The mission was routine and routine was exactly what made it dangerous. Far below, hidden in the mouth of a narrow alley, Ira Gamagōri eased his 1959 Cadillac Eldorado into the shadows before switching off the engine.

He stepped out and walked to the trunk. Inside rested two RPG-7 launchers alongside several olive green rockets. Rei Hōōmaru lifted one launcher onto her shoulder while Gamagōri took the other. Without a word, the pair moved into position between two abandoned buildings, waiting patiently for the unmistakable rhythm of rotor blades to grow louder.

Above them, the CH-53 continued its approach to the LZ. In the rear cabin, the loadmaster scanned the streets through the open ramp, his eyes constantly searching for movement. Then he saw them, both shouldering the weapons and his stomach dropped.

"Break! Break! Two armed personnel, alleyway, three o'clock low! Possible RPGs!"

The pilots quickly pulled on the controls, beginning a hard evasive bank but it was too late. Twin smoke trails erupted from the alley and the first rocket streaked harmlessly past the massive helicopter disappearing into the skyline but the second one hit its mark and slammed into the tail rotor assembly. A blinding flash of fire and shrapnel filled the aft section of the chopper and it lurched violently. Warning lights flooded the cockpit. The tail rotor disintegrated, sending fragments spinning through the air as the aircraft yawed uncontrollably over the city.

"Mayday! Mayday! Viking Two-One is hit!" one of the pilots shouted over the radio. "We've lost the tail rotor...we're going down! Two-one is going in hard... Two-one going down."

Miles away, in the security of her penthouse, Ragyo Kiryuuin watched the operation unfold through the building's extensive surveillance network. One monitor displayed the rooftop and another overlooked the alleyways. Every screen was alive with movement as the Marine expeditionary unit assigned to secure the crash site advanced with lethal precision.

Then the shooting began. Automatic gunfire erupted through the narrow roadways and muzzle flashes illuminated the night sky and bullets shattered glass and punched through walls where Yakuza insurgents took cover. The men on REVOCS' payroll all came out of the woodwork armed with Type 56s, Type 89s and QBZ-95s.

"Contact front!"

The lead fire team answered with disciplined, controlled bursts. Another element immediately maneuvered down a side street, seeking to flank the defenders while a squad leader calmly directed the assault over his radio.

"Alpha, suppress! Bravo, move!"

The response was instantaneous. As one team laid down accurate covering fire, the second sprinted across the open street and disappeared around the corner. Seconds later, the Marines struck the Yakuza from an unexpected direction while LAV-25s provided suppressive fire with their M242s, hitting the targets that the Marines couldn't hit effectively.

The resistance collapsed almost immediately and one by one, surviving gunmen threw down their weapons, while others attempted to flee deeper into the tower only to find additional Marines already blocking the exits. Ragyo rested her chin lightly against the back of one hand. There was no hesitation, no emotional outburst... only discipline.

"Remarkable..." She murmured

They weren't simply soldiers. They were professionals who had rehearsed moments like this countless times before ever setting foot in Honnō City. For the first time, Ragyo found herself studying an opponent she could not immediately predict.

"So..." Satsuki said quietly, a faint red mark already forming where the earlier slap had landed, "we are at war, then, Mother." She met Ragyo's gaze without fear. "Truly... you have overplayed your hand."

Satsuki was met with a swift slap to the face for her remark, one so powerful that it echoed through the penthouse. Satsuki's head turned with the force of the blow, strands of dark hair falling across her face. For a long moment, neither woman spoke. Slowly, Satsuki straightened her posture, brushed a loose lock of hair behind her ear, and looked back at her mother with the same unwavering resolve.

Ragyo smiled as though she had merely corrected a child. "My pathetic daughter..." she purred, her fingers lightly tracing Satsuki's cheek where she'd struck her. "Always so analytical. Always searching for patterns, probabilities, and outcomes."

Then her smile widened, "But you are correct about one thing." She walked toward the panoramic windows overlooking Honnō City, where distant columns of smoke still rose above the skyline. "Our little visitors have proven far more capable than I anticipated. So we shall educate ourselves."

Ragyo clasped her hands behind her back, "We will pay a visit to the Marine Corps installation on Okinawa and observe these Americans firsthand." She said with a soft giggle. "Think of it as a field trip to the zoo... just like when you were a little girl, him? Spending quality time with your dear mother...I do expect you to be on your best behavior as well."

Satsuki inclined her head ever so slightly, "As you wish... Mother." Outwardly, she remained the picture of obedience... Inwardly, however, a single thought surfaced. A desire for freedom... to feel as if she was part of something greater.

Chapter 4: Crayon Eaters, Hell Raisers

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ever since fleeing Honnō City and leaving behind the chaos that had consumed their lives, Ryuko Matoi and Mako Mankanshoku had found an unexpected sense of normalcy at MCAS Futenma. The American military installation was a far cry from the battlefield they had once called home, but for the first time in a long while, the days were quiet. Ryuko had settled into the slower pace with her usual guarded attitude, often spending her free time training, working out, or simply watching the aircraft come and go from the flight line. Mako, meanwhile, had embraced life on the base with boundless enthusiasm, making friends with almost everyone she met and somehow finding excitement in even the most ordinary routines.

Among the people they had met was Zoe, a Brazilian crew chief whose warm personality and endless patience quickly made them a familiar face. Curious about Brazilian culture, Mako had insisted that Zoe teach her how to samba after hearing stories about Carnival and seeing a few dance videos online. Unfortunately, enthusiasm couldn't make up for a complete lack of coordination. Mako stumbled over nearly every step, mixed up the rhythm, spun the wrong direction, and somehow managed to step on Zoe's feet more often than her own. Even so, she never stopped smiling, laughing at every mistake before eagerly asking to try again.

Ryuko leaned casually against a nearby railing, arms folded across her chest as she watched the lesson unfold. She couldn't suppress the faint smirk tugging at the corner of her lips each time Mako nearly tripped over herself. Despite the teasing expression, there was unmistakable relief in her crimson eyes. Seeing Mako laugh so freely after everything they had survived was something she never wanted to take for granted.

The afternoon sun bathed the base in warm golden light while helicopters rumbled in the distance and Marines carried on with their daily routines, barely paying attention to the unlikely trio. It was an ordinary day, something that had once seemed impossible. Whether Zoe was sharing stories from Brazil, patiently correcting Mako's latest misstep, chatting with Ryuko, or simply enjoying a rare moment of peace, both girls had come to appreciate Zoe's company. For now, the world wasn't ending, no one was trying to seize ultimate power, and the biggest challenge was helping Mako find the rhythm without sending everyone into fits of laughter.

Zoe laughed as Mako tripped over herself and helped her up. She then put on a slower song and began teaching her the moves in simple baby steps, "There you go! You're getting it!" She swayed her hips, "Like that... look seductive when you do it, hmm?"

Mako's eyes widened to dinner plate proportions at Zoe's suggestion, her face flushing a bright pink. "Seductive?! Me? Like a fancy lady in a movie?" She immediately took the instruction literally, striking an exaggerated pose with one hand on her hip and a dramatic, fluttering eyelash look that was more comical than sultry. She began to sway her hips with far too much vigor, nearly vibrating in place. "Like this, Zoe san? Am I doing it? Is it working? Do I look like a carnival queen?" Mako practically bounced around Zoe, her energy infectious and utterly chaotic as she tried to channel a maturity she definitely didn't possess.

Ryuko, meanwhile, felt something else entirely. The way Zoe swayed her own hips fluid, confident, and naturally alluring drew Ryuko’s gaze like a magnet. She tried to maintain her cool, detached posture, but her throat suddenly felt dry. A strange heat crept up her neck, and she found herself tracking every movement of Zoe's bronze skin beneath the sunlight.

She shifted her weight, making the cropped top of Senketsu to ride up just a fraction more than necessary, exposing a strip of toned midriff. "She's hopeless, Zoe," Ryuko called out, her voice carrying a slight rasp she didn't intend. She pushed off the railing and walked closer, stopping just inside Zoe's personal space. The height difference made Ryuko look up, and she let her gaze linger on Zoe's lips before meeting those green eyes with a half lidded, challenging smirk. "But maybe you should show us again. Slowly. I wanna see if you're actually good at this."

Mako let out a dramatic gasp, crossing her arms and pouting as she accepted the playful tap to her forehead. "Thinking too hard?! But I'm putting all my soul into this!" She suddenly brightened, her eyes sparkling with mischief as she plopped down onto the pavement in a dramatic flop. "I'm exhausted from all this passion! I need a snack break!" She rolled onto her back, kicking her legs in the air while gazing up at Zoe with undisguised admiration. "Zoe san moves like water! Like a beautiful, dancing river of Brazilian grace!"

Ryuko, however, wasn't listening to Mako's antics. She had been caught in the orbit of Zoe's movement, her breathing growing shallow as she watched those controlled circles of Zoe's hips. The way Zoe had called her 'sexy' sent a jolt through her that felt more potent than any Life Fiber synchronization. Her heart hammered against her ribs, and she felt an unfamiliar, insistent ache.

Miles beyond the gleaming towers of Honnō City, the countryside had become an armored battlefield. The rumble of turbine engines echoed across the open plains as a column of M1A1 Abrams tanks from the United States Marine Corps' 1st and 2nd Tank Battalions advanced along the highway. Their seventy ton hulls churned through the asphalt and dirt with relentless purpose, accompanied by LAV-25 reconnaissance vehicles, AAVs carrying Marine infantry, and logistical convoys stretching for miles behind them.

Through the sight, the lead tank commander scanned the horizon. "There," he said over the intercom.

Across a broad valley, another armored force emerged from behind a ridgeline. Dark green Type 74 main battle tanks rolled into defensive positions alongside Soviet built T-72s, their barrels slowly traversing toward the approaching Marines. Supporting them were M113 armored personnel carriers packed with REVOCS' Armed Security and Anti Riot Division, their black uniforms standing in stark contrast to the Marines' woodland MARPAT camouflage.

The distance between the two armored formations steadily shrank yet neither side fired... not yet. Inside the lead Abrams, the loader swallowed nervously as the gunner centered the crosshair over a distant Type 74 and lased.

"Target... Type 74. Eleven o'clock. Range two thousand four hundred."

"Identified," the gunner answered calmly.

The commander keyed his radio. "Thunder Six, this is Thunder One. Enemy armor confirmed. Approximately one company of Type 74s supported by T-72s. Request permission to engage."

Static filled the headset for only a moment before the battalion commander's voice returned. "Thunder One, hold your fire. Higher headquarters is attempting one final surrender demand."

The order was acknowledged immediately. "Roger. Holding."

The Marines remained disciplined, every main gun fixed on its assigned target. Across the valley, the REVOCS commanders interpreted the hesitation differently.

"They're afraid," one officer scoffed from atop a Type 74. "American propaganda has exaggerated their strength. One volley from our tanks and they'll retreat."

Another officer wasn't so convinced. "They're not moving because they don't have to." He looked through his binoculars at the Abrams' thick angular turrets. "They're waiting."

An uneasy silence settled over the battlefield and hundreds of armored vehicles stared each other down, engines idling, gun barrels unwavering. The only sounds were the whine of gas turbines, the clatter of diesel engines, and the distant wind sweeping across the empty fields. Just one order... one nervous trigger pull...and the outskirts of Honnō City would erupt into the largest tank battle Japan had witnessed in generations.

"You may fire when ready..." Ragyo commanded, her voice calm and utterly devoid of hesitation, "Rei... order Itami to have his Type 90s on standby."

Command fell silent, every officer understood what those words meant. One order from her and the valley outside Honnō City would become a graveyard of steel.

With a respectful not, Rei turned to the Communications officer, "Relay the order to Captain Itami. Have his Type 90 company remain on standby behind the second defensive line. They are not to engage unless the Marines breach the perimeter."

"Yes, ma'am."

Several kilometers away, beneath the shade of a camouflage net, a formation of Type 90 main battle tanks sat concealed among the trees. Leaning casually against one of the tanks was Captain Yoji Itami. His uniform was immaculate despite the dust of the staging area. A manga volume rested in one hand while a portable game console occupied the other, his helmet hanging lazily from a nearby tow hook.

The radio on his chest crackled to life. "Captain Itami, this is REVOCS Command. Lady Ragyo has ordered your company to remain on standby. Prepare to reinforce the front if Marine armor breaks through."

Itami sighed, slipping the game console into a pouch. "So much for a quiet afternoon..."

He snapped the manga shut and climbed onto the turret of the lead Type 90, "All crews, mount up. Engines on, but hold position."

Around him, diesel engines roared to life one after another as the Japanese built tanks awakened from their concealment. He watched as the dust rose into the air, Itami adjusted his gloves with a resigned smile. He had beaten the Saderans... now it was time to see what these Marines were made of. Having pretty much lost in Afghanistan and Iraq and having been useless against the Saderans... it was safe to say they'd be easy.

"I really should've picked a safer job..." He chuckled.

The uneasy silence shattered. A Type 74's 105 mm main gun erupted with a blinding flash, its thunderclap echoing across the valley. The sabot round screamed toward the lead Marine formation, exploding in a plume of earth and smoke just short of an Abrams.

For a split second... not a soul moved of breathed. Then the Marine Command net came to life, "Contact front! Enemy Army, return fire!"

Inside one of the Abrams, the gunner grinned as the driver slammed the tank into motion and the AGT-1500 turbine engine roared, "Mind if I set the mood?"

The commander smirked. "Do it."

An aggressive synthwave track roared through the crew's intercom, its pounding electronic beat blending with the howl of the turbine. The gunner settled his crosshairs and lased the target, "Identified... Type 74... SABOT!"

"On the way!" The Abrams lurched as its 120 mm cannon fired.

Across the valley, the Type 74 simply ceased to exist as a fighting vehicle. The depleted uranium penetrator punched through the aging armor with devastating effect, the turret disappearing behind a cloud of smoke and flame.

"Target!"

"Destroyed!"

"Next target!"

The Marine company fired and moved almost as a single machine. One after another, the aging Type 74s were struck before many could fire a second round. Thermal sights cut effortlessly through smoke and dust, allowing the Abrams crews to engage with precision while on the move. Within minutes, burning wrecks littered REVOCS' forward line.

"They're switching to the T-72s!" one Marine commander reported.

The newer tanks surged forward to plug the gap. Unlike the Type 74s, these T-72s had been modernized with Japanese built thermal imagers, laser rangefinders, and upgraded fire control systems. Their crews fought with determination, placing accurate return fire across the valley.

But beneath the upgraded electronics remained the same Soviet era design. Their lower profile made them harder to spot, yet their ammunition carousel and comparatively limited gun depression remained liabilities against opponents exploiting the terrain. Marine gunners rapidly identified hull down positions, coordinating overlapping fields of fire as Abrams platoons maneuvered to engage from advantageous angles.

Another T-72 fired and an Abrams slewed hard behind a low ridgeline, the incoming round showering dirt across its glacis before ricocheting away.

"Missed us!"

"Send it back!"

The Abrams crested just enough for its gun tube to clear the ridge.

"SABOT!"

The return shot crossed the battlefield in an instant. Another T-72 ground to a halt, smoke pouring from the engine deck before the ammunition cooked off and the turret flew skyward. Miles away inside REVOCS Headquarters, the command center had descended into controlled chaos. A reconnaissance drone circled high above the battlefield, transmitting crystal clear footage onto a massive display that dominated the room.

Columns of black smoke marked where armored vehicles had stood only moments before. Rei's normally composed expression faltered as reports flooded across her console, "Lady Ragyo!" She swallowed before continuing. "We've lost six Type 74s..."

Another transmission interrupted her.

"...Correction, nine."

A few seconds later, another voice cut across the command net.

"Enemy breakthrough in Sector Three!"

Rei's fingers flew across the keyboard. "Three additional T-72s have been disabled! Our left flank is beginning to collapse!"

Ragyo never looked away from the drone feed. On the enormous screen, Abrams formations advanced with disciplined precision, firing, maneuvering, and covering one another as if the battlefield were a carefully rehearsed exercise.

"So..." she murmured. "This... is the true face of the United States Marine Corps. All to avenge some pilots..." For the first time since the battle began, there wasn't a hint of amusement in her voice. Only fascination.

The destruction of the last T-72 shattered what remained of REVOCS' first defensive line. One after another, the M1s surged forward, their gas turbines howling as the formation accelerated down the broad avenue leading toward Honnō City. It was the kind of rapid armored thrust Marines referred to as a thunder run, an aggressive push intended to overwhelm the defender before they could reorganize.

Dust billowed behind the advancing columns as LAV-25s raced alongside the tanks, infantry riding close behind in the vehicles. Inside the lead Abrams, the commander watched the thermal display.

"So far, so good..."

Then the gunner gasped.

"Contact!"

A dozen fresh thermal signatures appeared from side streets and concealed revetments.

"They're not T-72s."

The commander's eyes narrowed.

"...Type 90s."

From hidden positions, sleek Japanese built main battle tanks emerged almost simultaneously, their 120 mm guns already trained on the Marine advance. At their head stood Captain Yoji Itami's company. The Japanese tanks opened fire in disciplined succession.

The first sabot round streaked across the boulevard, striking an Abrams squarely on the turret front. The impact sent sparks and fragments flying, but the armor held. The Marine tank rocked violently before settling back onto its suspension.

Inside, the loader let out an impressed whistle.

"Nice try, bitch!" The commander of the affected tank cackled.

The commander smirked beneath his helmet.

"Looks like somebody finally brought a real tank."

Then another Type 90 fired and the Abrams answered immediately. Twin 120 mm cannons thundered almost as one. One Marine sabot round slammed into a Type 90's frontal armor, forcing the Japanese tank to reverse behind cover. A second struck another along the hull as it attempted to maneuver, knocking it out of the fight in a burst of smoke and flying debris.

"Target hit!" The commander chuckled. "Oh, this guy..." He watched another Type 90 dart between buildings, trying to line up a flank shot.

"How d'you like it when somebody's shootin' back instead of chuckin' arrows?" Another Commander added.

The crew laughed over the intercom. The driver shoved the Abrams around a corner while the gunner tracked the moving target through his thermal sight.

"Identified."

"Fire!"

Another Abrams recoiled.

Half a second later, the sabot round smashed into the Type 90's side armor. Flames erupted from the engine compartment as the tank ground to a halt. Across the boulevard, Itami lowered his binoculars with a grimace.

"...Yep."

He climbed back into his commander's hatch.

"I officially hate today."

"Orders, Captain?" Shino asked, her voice trembling.

Itami glanced at the advancing wall of Abrams. "Keep moving. Don't let them dictate the fight."

Around him, the remaining Type 90s dispersed into the city's streets, using intersections, buildings, and narrow avenues to force the Marines into a dangerous urban armored engagement where every corner could conceal another gun.

"God I can't believe we're fighting JGSDF..." a Marine murmured.

"They're mercs... not JGSDF."

The thunder run that had carried the Marine armor through the outskirts of Honnō City slowed to a crawl as the Type 90s disappeared into the urban maze. The streets that had been open ground were now a hunting ground. Every alleyway was a potential ambush. Every shattered building could hide a tank. The lead Abrams rolled forward another hundred meters before its commander raised a closed fist.

"All armor, halt."

The order traveled instantly through the battalion net. One by one, the M1A1s stopped, forming a defensive line among the ruined streets. Their turrets remained trained toward the city, scanning for movement through thermal optics. High above the battlefield, two AH-1Z Viper attack helicopters banked through the sky, their stub wings loaded with rockets and Hellfires. The Marines on the ground looked up as the unmistakable shape of the Cobras appeared.

Itami poked out of his hatch and scanned the horizon with his binoculars, that was when he spotted the Cobras, "Well..." He sighed. "That complicates things."

The rear ramps of the LAV-25s slammed open, "Dismount! Move!"

Marine mechanized infantry poured into the streets, moving quickly and deliberately alongside the armored column. Among them were anti armor teams carrying FGM-148 Javelin missile systems, their launchers ready as they advanced into the urban terrain. They were on the hunt and determined to win the fight.

The Marines spread out behind the protection of walls, destroyed vehicles, and abandoned structures, coordinating with the AH-1Z Cobras circling overhead. The attack helicopters moved like predators above the battlefield, scanning rooftops, intersections, and possible REVOCS positions while feeding information back to the troops below.

Meanwhile, the Abrams crews made their own preparations. One by one, the M1A1s shut down their massive turbine engines. The roar of dozens of gas turbines faded, leaving an eerie silence across the battlefield.

Then the smaller generators came alive. The Abrams' Auxiliary Power Units powered up, keeping their communications, sensors, and electronics running while the tanks remained ready to fight. Inside the lead tank, the commander watched the city through his sights.

"Everyone stays sharp."

The gunner checked his display.

"Engines cold, systems green."

The commander nodded.

"Good."

He looked toward the smoke rising above Honnō City.

"Itami's smart. He knows he can't win a straight tank battle out here. But now he's got to deal with Marines on the ground, armor holding the line, and Cobras overhead. Hell... he's lucky we didn't bring the Lightning."

The commander adjusted his headset. "Welcome to combined arms."

Across the city, Captain Yoji Itami watched the Marine deployment unfold through his optics. The Abrams laid in wait while the anti tank teams did the hunting and if Itami chose to run... the Cobras and the Abrams would be what he faced.

The battle for Honnō City ended with the collapse of REVOCS' armored resistance. The Type 90s had fought fiercely, but once Marine infantry moved into the streets alongside the Abrams and the AH-1s began striking from above with Hellfire missiles, the outcome was inevitable. The Type 90s were isolated.

One by one, their engines fell silent and Captain Yoji Itami had abandoned his damaged command tank before it was destroyed. With the battle lost, he made the only choice he could. The mighty leader who had faced off against Saderan legions had surrendered... and the man who had been celebrated as a hero now stood as a prisoner of war.

Nearby, Shino and her crew were not so fortunate. Her Type 90 burned quietly in the aftermath, another casualty of a battle that had grown far beyond what anyone expected. When the JGSDF Chinook arrived to retrieve captured personnel, the atmosphere aboard the helicopter was colder than an Alaskan winter.

The soldiers inside recognized Itami immediately but there was no excitement nor was there admiration... only silence. The same man whose name had once inspired respect was now viewed with anger and disappointment. A hero who had crossed the line and lived long enough to become the villain... a traitor. As the Chinook lifted off, Itami watched as Honnō city slipped away, he had no joke.. no snide remark.

On the streets below, a different scene unfolded. The thunder of battle was replaced by the steady rumble of engines. The Abrams advanced through Honnō City, their turrets locked in the travel position as they moved between buildings. Their LAV-25 escorts rolled alongside them, carrying Marines who watched the sidewalks and intersections.

Matarō Mankanshoku stood with his mother and father, staring as the massive tanks passed by. The ground shook beneath his feet with every movement of the armored column and then, one Abrams slowed slightly. The commander's hatch opened and a female Marine looked down and noticed the family watching. Instead of a stern military expression, she smiled and raised a hand in greeting... then she gave Matarō a playful wave and blew him a kiss.

The boy immediately froze and his eyes widened as his face flushed while his father laughed, "Looks like someone has a favorite tank crew."

Bosozoku bikers watched from the roadside. Normally, the roar of their motorcycles was what commanded attention but today, they were completely overshadowed by the massive tanks and their LAV-25 companions. One of the bikers connected his speakers and Sabaton's Panzer Battalion blasted through the street as the armored behemoths advanced.

Eventually the armored column eventually reached the center of Honnō City's slums. The town square, once dominated by the towering monument of Ragyo Kiryuuin, had become a gathering point for thousands of civilians. For years, the statue had stood as a symbol, a reminder of REVOCS' control and a reminder of who held the power.. who picked the winners and losers.

The roar of another engine approached, unlike the monstrous Abrams or quick LAVs, this vehicle was built for a much different purpose. It was an M88 Hercules, its massive frame covered in dust, the Marine combat engineers inside had not come out to recover a fallen tank but instead stopped before the towering statue. The crowd went silent and the engineers stepped out and began securing the thick tow cables around its base. People watched form the sidewalks, whispering amongst themselves.

"What are they doing?"

Then, a child pointed. "Are they taking it away?"

The answer came when the M88's Continental AV1790 roared and as the recovery vehicle tightened the cable yet the statue remained standing for a moment.. the vehicle commander ordered more power and the structure began to shift and the crowd gasped. The symbol that had watched over Honnō City for so long had finally began to fall. The M88 pulled harder and metal groaned, concrete cracked and with one last violent movement, the statue toppled from its pedestal and crashed onto the square below.

Silence followed... and then cheers erupted. Not from the soldiers but from people who had spent decades living under that monument. The Marines simply watched, allowing the moment to belong to the civilians. The statue of Ragyo Kiryuuin was gone and for the first time... the city belonged to the people.

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact... M1s are governed at their top speed. They're actually a lot faster with them removed, tracks are what limit them.

Chapter 5: Of Her Own Accord

Chapter Notes

A short chapter but it sets up the next arc.

"Atlas Two-Six is away. All remaining evacuation units, execute Level Three evacuation protocols. Urgent surgicals only."

The transmission cut through every Marine frequency like a final heartbeat, raw and urgent, as the last wave of evacuation birds clawed their way out of the collapsing city. Below, the rooftop helipad trembled under the downdraft of the final refugee transport, an MV-22 Osprey packed with the Mankanshoku family and dozens of terrified civilians. Two AH-1Zs rode shotgun on its flanks, their rotors carving through the smoke choked sky as they raced toward the distant coast.

Satsuki Kiryuin stood motionless on the edge of the roof, watching the aircraft vanish into the haze. She had been left behind. Only two battered Marine rifle squads remained, forming a tight, desperate perimeter as gunfire stitched the streets below. This was it. One last bird. One last chance.

Then came the roar, deep, guttural, unmistakable. Another Osprey thundered overhead, descending through billowing black smoke like a wounded angel of deliverance.

"Get to the roof and link up with that Osprey! Move! Move! Move!" a female Marine staff sergeant bellowed, her voice cutting through the chaos as she waved the remaining personnel toward the landing zone. The massive tiltrotor punched through the haze, its twin proprotors blasting debris and grit across the rooftop as it settled onto the concrete with a heavy thud.

Over the radio, Ricardo’s voice came through calm and steady amid the storm. "Cactus Two-Six, we’ve got a hydraulic leak, but we’re still combat effective."

The ramp slammed down. Zoe was already moving, directing the flow with practiced precision. "Wounded first! Let’s go!" Several injured Marines were half carried, half dragged aboard. She knelt among them instantly, checking tourniquets, applying fresh pressure dressings, her hands steady even as the cabin filled with shouted orders and the thunder of idling engines.

Satsuki didn’t wait to be told. She moved straight to the mounted ramp gun, gripping the handles with iron resolve, eyes scanning the surrounding rooftops and smoke covered alleys for any sign of pursuers. Zoe glanced back and gave her a sharp nod. "Hope you know how to use that thing!" she shouted over the deafening roar.

Ricardo shoved the thrust lever forward. The Osprey shuddered violently as it clawed its way off the rooftop, engines screaming under the strain. Martin reached for the nacelle controls, fighting to swing the massive proprotors into forward flight mode.

"Dammit, they’re stuck at forty five degrees!" Martin snarled. "We’re a goddamn sitting duck up here!"

For a split second, the cockpit fell deathly quiet beneath the blaring caution alarms and the howl of overworked turbines.

Ricardo never looked away from the smoke-filled horizon. "We keep flying," he said, voice like steel.

On the ramp, Satsuki slipped on a David Clark headset. The full scope of the collapse flooded her ears: "First wave of civilian transports is away. HMLA-369, provide cover. All armored units fall back to the beach immediately. HQ has ordered full evacuation."

Enemy rounds began stitching the fuselage. Satsuki answered with a long, roaring burst from the minigun, the weapon bucking in her hands as spent casings rained across the ramp. Then the Osprey jolted hard, an RPG slammed into its side. The starboard engine belched thick black smoke. Alarms screamed, Ricardo and Martin wrestled the controls, muscles straining to keep the dying bird in the air.

"Take this fat fucker up! If we go down then we're taking those AA Guns with us!" Ricardo called out over the comms.

Satsuki angled the ramp gun and opened fire on the rooftop anti-aircraft guns until the barrels glowed red up. Then, a second RPG struck. The world tilted violently and the Osprey spun out of control, rotors howling in protest. Satsuki held on with white knuckled determination as the aircraft corkscrewed downward and slammed into the ground.

"We're hit! This is Cactus Two-Six, we're going down at grid square-"

Then, darkness followed. Satsuki came to minutes later in a haze of pain and ringing ears. The wreckage smoked around her. Marines were already back in the fight, weapons up, pouring fire into advancing REVOCS operatives. Martin and Ricardo had grabbed their M14s from the wreckage. Zoe was firing an M4 from behind a chunk of twisted fuselage, her face streaked with blood and soot.

"TAKE THIS AND STAY DOWN!" a Marine roared, shoving an M4 into Satsuki’s hands before a round punched into his chest plate and dropped him.

"Last mag!" another Marine shouted.

"Satsuki, last mag! Make it count!" Zoe called, tossing her a fresh magazine through the chaos.

Satsuki caught the magazine mid air and slammed it home, her movements sharp and confident despite the blood roaring in her ears. The Marines poured out their final bursts. Then… silence. Click after click echoed across the shattered street as weapons ran dry. Smoke curled from the Osprey’s wreckage. They were surrounded. REVOCS operatives closed in from every direction, cutting through the haze like predators cornering a wounded prey. The Marines shifted into a tight circle around Satsuki, bayonets fixed, fists clenched, ready for the end.

The low, guttural purr of a V12 engine sliced through the tension. A pristine Rolls Royce Cullinan rolled forward untouched by the surrounding devastation, its glossy black paint gleaming like polished obsidian under the flickering fires. The operatives immediately lowered their weapons and stepped back in perfect, obedient unison.

The rear suicide door opened with a soft, luxurious click and out stepped Ragyo Kiryuuin. She moved with malicious yet seductive grace, her multicolored hair catching the firelight in shifting, unnatural hues. A faint, amused chuckle escaped her lips as her gaze locked onto Satsuki.

"To think my pathetic daughter would try to run from her dear mother..." Ragyo's voice dripped with mocking affection. She tilted her head, smiling with the warmth of a serpent. With a casual flick of her fingers, she motioned to her men. "Seize her."

Two operatives surged forward and grabbed Satsuki by the arms, wrenching them behind her back with brutal efficiency.

"As for these Marines..." Ragyo's smile widened, cold and delighted, "they will make fine test subjects."

End Notes

So we decided to do a rewrite of the story... one thing that we spoke about exploring was the island outside of Honnoji Academy. I personally imagined it being a rather unstable dog eat dog sort of place considering how the school is run. So it's bound to have gangs and yakuza syndicates working within it which would lead to a sustained JSDF and USMC presence....

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